

LEVINAS AND THE SYMBOL OF THE TEMPLE OF JERUSALEM FOR THE WHOLE OF HUMANITY

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ABSTRACT: Levinas does not speak quite often about the Temple, but in his Talmudic commentaries, says quite impressive things about the Temple and its image. Commenting the Tractate Yoma 10a of Talmud, he says that «The Temple of Jerusalem in Jewish thought is a symbol, which signifies for the whole of humanity». This lecture focuses on clarify this sentence and the universality of one Temple, which «is an exact replica of the heavenly Temple, the order of absolute holiness» according with his comment to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner.

KEY WORDS: TEMPLE OF JERUSALEM, POLITICS-MESSIANISM, HISTORY, RESPONSIBILITY, GUILT, HOLINESS.

RESUMEN: Levinas no suele hablar del Templo, pero en sus comentarios talmúdicos, dice algunas cosas muy impresionantes acerca del templo y de su imagen. Así, al comentar el Tratado Yoma 10a del Talmud, dice que «El templo de Jerusalén, según el pensamiento judío, es un símbolo, que significa para la humanidad entera». Esta ponencia se centra en clarificar esta tesis de Levinas y en la universalidad de un sólo templo, que según su comentario al Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner «es una réplica exacta del Templo celestial, el orden de la santidad absoluta»

PALABRAS CLAVE: TEMPLO DE JERUSALÉN, POLÍTICA-MESIANISMO, HISTORIA, RESPONSABILIDAD, CULPA, SANTIDAD

1. The Temple of Jerusalem as eschatological and ethical symbol

In *Beyond the Verse. A set of Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas does not speaks frequently about neither temples, nor *the* Temple. But in the few passages where he speaks of it, he says quite impressive things. The first of them is that

«The Temple of Jerusalem in Jewish thought is a symbol which signifies for the whole of humanity; it is not simply a national institution».¹

This text is extracted from a chapter in which Levinas comment the Talmudic Tractate Yoma 10a, who speak about the Romans, the Persians, and the Chaldeans, about wars and about political decisions. Both Chaldeans and Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem.

From the time of Romans, the Temple does not exist anymore. It seems to be an empty place, only ruins, but ruins of the place of revelation of God to Abraham and Isaac. But the Temple, even in ruins, is a revelation of God. Moreover, ruins are a good symbol of a relationship with God that cannot be inserted in any totality. The Temple is not anymore a totality, but a place of fragments which speak us about war, suffering,

¹ Levinas, E., *Beyond the Verse. Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994, p. 63.

deportation, invasion, and conquest, that is, these ruins speak us about violence. They speak about politics, not about the messianic peace.

According to Levinas, Yoma 10b is a Talmudic text, in which some rabbinical scholars discuss a prophecy about the end of history. It is a prophecy that predicts a war between the Persians and the Romans, that is, between two great empires.

«It concerns the possible war which should end History and which would be played out—if wars are played out— between these two empires.»²

History, for Levinas, is the human time in which one can achieve individual or collective goals. These goals are understood as the real ends of History, and for that reason history has a meaning. But to develop this goals and to conclude history, it is needed the work of politicians. History consequently is the time for politics, for ambitions, for the construction of a social order, and for establishing permanently the final settlement of history. The flow of time in history is directed towards future, towards an end, a goal. A clash of civilizations, or a war, means always at least two different and incompatibles goals.

This vision of history is a Kantian or Hegelian one: history has an end, and a moral end. It is a development, for instance of freedom or self-consciousness, or the construction of a reign of ends. And its means can be violence, but persuasion, science, bureaucracy, etc., too. Politics is the place of rivalry, not necessarily war. But politics always suggest an idea of a struggle towards ends, an idea «on the meaning of political life which, admittedly, is not always war, and which can become rivalry, competition and even pure emulation, during periods of peaceful coexistence between powers».³ In any case, politics means always the reduction of the other to the same, to the universal for which the politician is fighting. Consequently politics is a egology, an act of reduction of the other to the totality of the same.

But developing the principle of history towards its conclusion, to establish the reign of ends, or to extend freedom to all humanity, is for Levinas tantamount to «the false Messianisms of modern times (times, however, which are defined as times of conclusions».⁴ Politicians and philosophers of history, which proclaim an end and a meaning to history, are then false Messiahs, because to point a goal in a possible future that gives meaning to all the rest of the time «relativizes and devalues every moment [...] foreseeing a supra-temporal eternity of ideal».⁵ According to Levinas, history contrasts with Messianism and eschatology. Messianism has nothing to do with fighting for a goal, with historicism, or with a devaluation of the present or past time. Eschatology has nothing to do with goals, achievements or history.

In *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas explains what he understand under «Messianism». Messianism is not related to history, or to the end of history. If it were so, then the «Messiah» should not differentiate himself from a politician. A politician works for a better world in the future. But the Messiah is not only the promise of a better future, of a good direction toward a goal in history, but also in present. This present, and all

² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³ *Ibidem.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibidem.*

presents times can be the plenitude of time in which the Messiah lives. He does not live tending to a future, to a goal, not yet arrived. A politician can be a savior, but only in historical terms. Messianism, on the contrary, involves the plenitude of every moment. The messianic time is the «always»:

«Messianism is therefore not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops History. It is my power to bear the suffering of all. It is the moment when I recognize this power and my universal responsibility».⁶

Messianism means the own power and the own responsibility to bear the suffering of all humankind, and not only for the sufferings of the people of my own present, but also for all the sufferings the world has ever seen. I have an unlimited responsibility, and as such, an unlimited suffering to shoulder. In chapter V of *Otherwise than Being* Levinas cites Zosima in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*: «each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others». It seems a huge, radical, and terrible situation that concerns everybody —not only Zosima—, independently of the guilt that appears to his personal consciousness. For that reason, this demand has nothing to do —apparently— with justice. Moreover, if justice has to do with reciprocity, Messianism expresses a relationship of non-reciprocity between my responsibility and that of the other. And that means asymmetry in human relationships.

If this is true, there is a deep contrast between Zosima's and Ivan Karamazov's visions of justice. For Ivan, justice means lawfulness; a right behavior is a fair one, as if I would have signed a social contract. This contract is based upon the premise that I exist solely for myself, that I can only accept a loss of freedom for the sake of a profit, like security, etcetera. In consequence, one must respond only of his own actions, and of the suffering he causes. I must pay for my own actions, not for the others.

It is true that I can fight for a better world, but that depends upon my personal decision, and just in case my responsibility is not an unlimited one. Freedom for Ivan Karamazov means autonomy, self-reference. Levinas calls this vision of freedom «egotistical». As autonomous being each one must answer exclusively of his autonomous decisions. I can suffer for erroneous or unjust decisions of other persons, and I can choose to fight them. Ivan's sense of justice is then a political one.

On the contrary, Zosima's vision of justice is a messianic one. Or in other words, Zosima's perspective involves that our duties are prior to our freedom. And that means, that my duties with my fellow men constitute my subjectivity. I am a subjectivity not because I relate to myself, and because I must become actively myself. It is not sameness that makes me a person, but the other and my asymmetrical duty with the other. I am a subjectivity insofar as I respond and answer for the other. I am constituted as subject by the face of the other, and not by my personal autonomy and independence. But what means «face» for Levinas? In a very well known text he says:

«The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name the face».⁷

⁶ Levinas, E., *Difficult Freedom*, John Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1990, pp. 89-90.

⁷ Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity...*, *op. Cit.*, p. 50.

The face is not the real face of a person which I perceive, but the absolutely unimportance of the own consciousness, of my personal ideas about the other. The other transcends my consciousness, my ideas, my interiority, and me. The other has no appearance to me in his transcendence, and for this reason, he and me, does not constitute ever a «we». I must treat the other always as a guest, caring for him. And this taking care is a moral command: Do not kill me! «The ethical responsibility for the other precedes knowledge of the other».⁸

But why has the other such a power upon myself? Why has termed Levinas this vision of justice «Messianism»? What has all of this to do with the symbolism of the Temple of Jerusalem?

If Messianism is radically different from politics, then Messianism cannot belong to history, it belongs to another form of temporality, and it belongs to Holy history. And the essence of the Holy History is the «always». By contrast, one can characterize the temporality of the historicism or the political activity as the «never». If time must continue is for the only reason that the goal and end of history has, until now, never been achieved. I do not want to say that freedom has never been achieved. Of course it does! «But “never” does not contrast with “sometime” but to “always”».⁹ That is so, because the goal of history must be a universal situation or condition for the whole of humanity. According to Hegel, history needs to spread freedom all over the world. According to Kant, history needs a universal kingdom of ends. «Never» is then, a general notion, and a modal notion, because it has to do with the possibility of history. History is only possible, according to every type of historicism, because its end has never been achieved. This absolute negativity of the end is the motor of time.

But perhaps there are another ways of living in time. Time can be a time of development. But the time of Israel, according to Levinas, the Messianism, is to be subjected to an «always». And that means a time in which any moment could be devaluated. Every moment can have an absolute meaning, and not a relative one. If the time of development is the time of a totality, which spreads itself through every moment, then to attach to a time where always is a possibility of absoluteness, is to affirm a temporal sequence incapable of constitute a totality. Every moment has an infinite value. No moment is relative to another that confers it meaning. But a moment with infinite value is a moment of holiness, a sacred, blessed and pure moment.

«Does not Israel attach itself to an ‘always’ —in other words, to a permanence in time, to a time held by moments of holiness, by the way in which they have a meaning or are ‘so close to the goal’— and where not one of these moments is lost, or to be lost, but they are all to be deepened, that is to say, sublimated? And instead of remaining word, a purely theoretical view or doctrinal affirmation, or some sort of coexistence of moments of time passing, do not this predilection and this signification of the always call for a whole structuring of concrete human reality and a whole orientation of social and intellectual life - perhaps justice itself - which would render only such a signification possible and significant?».¹⁰

⁸ Williams, R., *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1992, p. 298.

⁹ Polo, L., *Hegel y el posthegelianismo*, Eunsa, Pamplona, p. ¿?

¹⁰ Levinas, E., *Beyond the Verse...*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

Levinas «believes that revelation is an event that places each of us in a certain position, posture or attitude prior to anything that we do or any act we perform».¹¹ And nowadays, the Temple is a revelation in such a sense. But according to Levinas, revelation occurs in the face-to-face relationship, not in symbols. It is the face of other person that calls me to concern for him. One can see in the face of the other the divine command to accept him, to accept his humanity, and to respond him. Then, we can ask ourselves if there can be a revelation in stones, instead of the human face? Does not that mean a contradiction in a central theme of Levinas' philosophy?

As a ruin, the Temple of Jerusalem is not only a fragment of a magnificent political past of the Jewish People. As a dead thing, as a ruin, it speaks about the eschatology. And it speaks, to humankind, but making each human being free from the concern of a time to come, and absolving him from the worry about future and history, which founds politics.

«The eschatological, as the 'beyond' of history, draws beings out of the jurisdiction of history and the future; it arouses them in and calls them forth to their full responsibility. It restores to each instant its full signification in that very instant».¹²

Levinas speaks about the meaning of the eschatological as always, and not as something beyond time, when he comments another Talmudic text. This is the Tractate Menahoth 99b-100a, which speaks of the Mishná, one of the most sacred rituals performed at the Temple of Jerusalem. The *Mishná* is the ceremony in which the priests every *Sabbath* leave bread on a table covered in gold before the Lord, and eat the bread, which they put on the table seven days ago. Levinas emphasizes the permanence of the ritual:

«The position of the bread on the table, continually before the Lord – 'before me [continually]', says the text. It is the meaning of permanence».¹³

To emphasize permanence means to underscore eternalness, perpetuity. The ritual is a perpetual duty. Not only a duty performed only on *Sabbath*, because there were fresh bread always, permanently there, on the tables. And that speaks about a permanent present, about every instant, not about future. Levinas ask himself:

«What does permanence signify? What does the 'always' signify? How can the always have signification? How does Israel think the significance of the always?»¹⁴

The Bread on the table has the name of Shewbread: the bread that shows, the bread of faces¹⁵. According to Levinas, politics in Israel has a different meaning from that of western's historicism. Political activity, and the ideal of a politician in Israel, has a perfect symbol in the figure of Joseph in the book of *Genesis*. «Kingship in Israel is always Joseph feeding the people».¹⁶ And this feeding of the hungry is performed and symbolized at the core of the Temple of Jerusalem. The kingship of somebody is

¹¹ Morgan, M., *Discovering Levinas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge MA, 2007, p. 214.

¹² Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1969, p. 23.

¹³ Levinas, E., *Beyond the Verse...*, *op. Cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

connected with the sacred action of compassion, an action before the face of the other. And an action, which must always be performed at the core of the Temple. The priests come in the Sancta Sanctorum looking in every moment at his faces, put the table on a gold table, and come off of this room with the bread of the last Sabbath looking mutually to the faces, and eating them after depositing it on another gold table. These priests perform the ritual of the always, the ritual of the *Mishná*, by which «the permanence of the human is ensured by the solidarity constituted around a communal work».¹⁷

2. The body of the human being as image of the Heavenly Temple

The Temple of Jerusalem symbolizes then, the «always», that the moment of absolute value, are all the moments during which we feed and take care for the others. For that reason the symbol of the Temple of Jerusalem is, at the same time, a symbol of the most sacred, because it «is an exact replica of the heavenly Temple, the order of absolute holiness».¹⁸ So, we have that the Temple of Jerusalem represents in Earth the Heavenly Temple. It is exactly an *imago Templi*, and an imago of eternity, and of justice.

But if the Temple was destroyed, and only its ruins remain forever, the rituals performed by the People of Israel constitute the face to face relationship that can always save the world and judge it. Perhaps the most known of these rituals is the twice a day prayer of the *Shema Ysra'el*. «According to the rabbinical tradition, this prayer expresses the acceptance of the 'celestial yoke', the submission to the Law. Submission to the Law, permanence of service».¹⁹ Service must be performed always. And for that reason, each son of Abraham must care for «before everyone and for everyone». We have just remembered this sentence of the *staret Zosima*. It is inserted in a tale of brothers. Now we can remember another tale of brothers, that of Cain and Abel. After Cain's fratricidal act, he answers God, if he was supposedly the nurse of his brother. A nurse is someone who cares for the sick, the hungry, thirsty, and so on. And one can say, that this is the testament of *Zosima*, and the «celestial yoke» that must be accepted always (twice a day) by the Jewish People.

Furthermore, Levinas relates the earthly Temple of Jerusalem with the human body.

«Within the body, the heart is the foundation stone of the heavenly Temple. When the Talmudic scholars, therefore, recommend turning one's heart towards the Holy of Holies when praying, they do not just mean turning in a certain direction but are indicating an act of identification or an intention to identify: one must become the sanctuary itself, the place of all holiness, and responsible for all holiness».²⁰

In the same way as the heavenly Temple is the place of all holiness, the heart of each human being must be the place of holiness, and for that reason the man or woman which prays is responsible for all holiness, and consequently he or she is responsible for all the evil too, and he must respond before each other human being. He is responsible

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Levinas, E., *Beyond the Subject...*, op. Cit., p. 158.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

before any time. So, the human being, his heart, the direction of his pray, the Temple of Jerusalem, all these realities are *imagi Templi* for Levinas.